WHAT PETER PAN SYNDROME?

In THE PETER PAN SYNDROME, Dan Kiley wrote about Peter Pan as though he were a real person. He wasn't and isn't. He was a projection of James Matthew Barrie's psyche and any psychoanalytical commentary re Peter must take into account the psychological profile of the author and his relationship to his literary work. Kiley wrote:"the most reliable source of Peter's anxiety is that his sense of urgency was out of balance..he calmly played his pipes as Captain Hook ignited the fuse of a bomb. He was thrilled at the prospect of drowning because dying sounded like a great way to spend the afternoon. It doesn't take a [sic] hysteric to get upset about these two calamities. Peter, however, didn't even break into a sweat (64)." Why would he? Peter Pan isn't real. He exists only within the framework of 1) THE LITTLE WHITE BIRD, where he made his first appearance in 1902; 2) the play, PETER PAN, which was written in 1904 and premiered in New York on November 6, 1905, and; 3) in the book PETER AND WENDY, published in 1911. Peter was half-human and half-fairy. He didn't and doesn't grow up, because Barrie wrote him into being as a boy who never grew up. Fictional characters do not have choices. And if Peter doesn't sweat, it's because it was not considered proper to discuss sweating or other bodily functions in the Victorian period, so Peter is, in this manner, simply conventional.

The essence of Kiley's "Peter Pan Syndrome" is that some men don't grow to adulthood along with their bodies. They look like adults, but inside they remain little boys in search of a Wendy to mother them. Fine, but what has this got to do with Peter Pan? Very little. Peter is not a boy-man. He is a fictional creature, conceived by Barrie and everything he does is governed by Barrie's plot structure. If you want to understand Peter Pan and how he came to be, you must examine the life of Barrie. Born on May 9, 1860, in Kirriemuir, Scotland, the 5th child of a weaver named David Barrie and his wife, Margaret Ogilvy, James Matthew Barrie was destined to remain small all his life, never growing taller than 5 feet. His brother, David, favorite of his mother, died in a skating accident at the age of 14. His death and Margaret's reaction to it gave birth to the idea of Peter Pan, a boy who would never grow beyond the age of 14. David would never grow older and Barrie would never grow taller, hence Peter Pan, whose story was first told to the Davies children in Kensington Gardens. Wendy was a fantasy version of Barrie's mother who often told him stories about her own childhood. Barrie's marriage to Mary Ansell, an actress in his play WALKER, LONDON, had not worked out. Barrie wanted children, but could have none with her, so he started staying in London and eventually moved to Kensington Gardens when they separated. Barrie made friends with the Davies children in the park and actually began to compete with their mother, Silvia, for their affection (see THE LITTLE WHITE BIRD). By this point in his career as a dramatist, Barrie was rich and his wealth gave him the edge on the Davies, but it was fate that gave him their children to raise as his own. The Davies parents, models for the Darlings in PETER PAN, died of cancer in their early forties. Barrie became ward of the 5 children, one of whom was named Peter. Because of his name, Peter Llewelyn Davies, he was ragged at Eton as the "real Peter Pan" and he hated it, probably as much as Alice Liddell Pleasance hated being reminded that she was the inspiration for ALICE IN WONDERLAND. Peter was actually named for Peter Ibbetson, and Peter Pan was a composite, a demi-god out of myth and folklore. The character was more of an extension of Barrie and his own siblings than any of the Davies children, but Peter was stuck with the name. The Davies children were the inspiration for the telling of the story. Their life with Barrie was ambiguous. After all, he was rich and in control of their lives, but not a blood relative. the younger ones like Michael found it easier to accept him than did Peter, but Barrie loved them all and it broke his heart when George was killed on the battlefield in World War I and Michael drowned with a friend in a pond at Oxford in what was suspected to be a suicide pact. Peter Llewelyn Davies ultimately committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a subway train. Barrie's money bought him a surrogate family, but it was not a happy substitution.

PETER PAN, like any literary work, is the author's wish-fulfillment fantasy, his catharsis, and there is nothing wrong with analyzing the material from a psychological point of view, but one must remember that there is never a one-to-one correspondence in a literary work. One cannot say Barrie IS Peter Pan, because Barrie is all of his characters. When Hook kidnaps the Lost Boys, Barrie is working out his desire to kidnap the Davies boys and keep them for his own family. When one of the boys shoots Wendy out of the sky with an arrow, this is Barrie shooting down his rival, Silvia Llewelyn-Davies. Wendy is linked with Barrie's past not only as a representative of his mother as a child, but as the namesake of Margaret Henley, daughter of poet W. E. Henley. She died when she was 6, another eternal child. The name came from her mispronunciation of the word "friendly". She always referred to Barrie as my "wendy" (friendly).

There is an underlying Oedipal theme throughout PETER PAN and we recall that Barrie was close to his mother, but had little in common with his father. It's significant that he wrote a novel in his mother's name, but nothing in his father's. Margaret Ogilvy died in 1895.

When Pan cuts off Hook's hand (castrating him), he is getting even with the elder Davies, his rival, the man who had been able to fulfill the Victorian ideal of having a big family, while Barrie remained barren. Peter was small like his creator and had the typical arrogant and aggressive personality peculiar to the little man who must always look up to other adults from the vantage point of a child. It is hardly surprising that Hook, the main father-figure in PETER PAN is first castrated and later killed and fed to an alligator. Nor is it too surprising that Wendy must first be killed, then reborn in Never Never Land where she will be courted by Peter to be his mother. Actually, Peter's feminine side is represented more by Tinker Bell than Wendy. Tink foreshadows contemporary feminism, while Wendy is closer to the ideal Victorian.

There may be a "Peter Pan Syndrome," but it is certainly much more complex than that outlined by Kiley. Barrie lived a long time. He died on June 21, 1937 in London. Best biography is Andrew Birkin's J. M. BARRIE AND THE LOST BOYS (1979).

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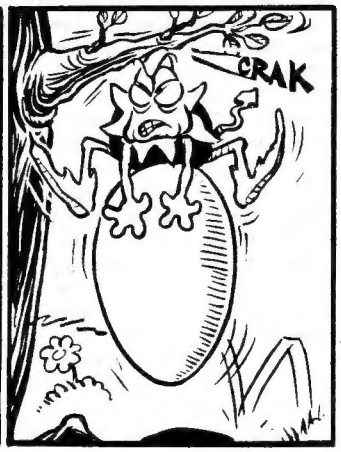

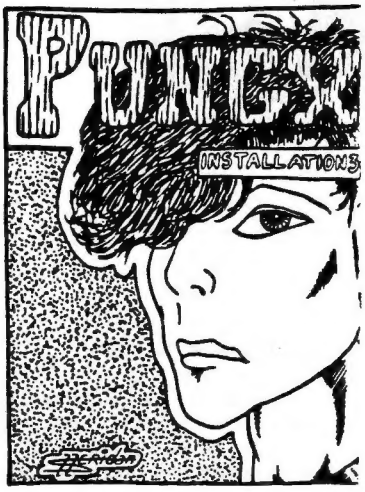

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